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ABSTRACT

This digest paper presents strategies and activities that can be used to encourage gifted students to develop their individual talents in the language arts. Suggestions for exploring poetic language especially free verse, include ideas for creating group poems and catalysts for creating individual poems. Suggestions for exploring the elements of fiction include encouraging divergent thinking about stories and using fairy tales with slightly altered characters to explore fiction. Suggestions for the study of biography and historical fiction address helping students research the facts and trying to describe an event from the perspective of various real or imaginary individuals. These types of activities are thought to develop creative writing, composing, and dramatizing skills as well as the higher level thinking skills of analysis, interpretation, and evaluation. (DB)

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CREATIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING LANGUAGE ARTS TO GIFTED STUDENTS (K-8)

By

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Creative Strategies for Teaching Language Arts to Gifted Students (K-8)

Joan Franklin Smutny

Teaching strategies that stimulate higher level and imaginative thinking are important curriculum extensions for gifted students who have already mastered much of the written and oral language skills required at their grade level. This digest presents strategies and activities that, while appropriate for all students, encourage gifted students especially to work at their own pace and level of complexity and extend their talents in a variety of ways.

Exploring Poetic Language: Free Verse

Poetry presents an opportunity for gifted students to explore (1) the quality of words, (2) the power of metaphoric language, and (3) the complexity and subtlety of meaning. When writing free verse without the constrictions of a rhyme scheme, students can focus on imagery and point of view, and experiment with different writing styles.

Creating a group poem. Creating a free verse poem with all the students before they work on their own can demonstrate the different ways to write free verse. Start by presenting a poster or picture on any topic, such as nature. Encourage the students to think about the atmosphere of the picture—the color, the feeling they get, and what certain images mean to them. Ask questions like:

If you were to think of the people (or animals) in this picture as colors, what colors would they be?

If you were to think of them as music or sound, what would you hear?

If they had texture, temperature (such as cold, smooth, warm, liquid, etc.) what might they be?

As the students contribute words, phrases, or parts of sentences, write them on a blackboard so that students can build on one another's contributions to create a poem. Once the students have shared their ideas, read the whole poem with respect and appreciation and talk about the images conveyed.

Creating individual poems. Using creative catalysts, students can enter new worlds and create images of their imaginary experience and analytic thought. Teachers can provide a wide range of creative catalysts (e.g., posters, pictures, paintings, films, musical recordings, books, games, puzzles, etc.) and guide students in deciding which catalyst they want to use. Try to stimulate original thinking through focused questions and directions:

Notice this photo of Jane Goodall.

What is she staring at?

What exists outside the lines of the painting?

What does her expression tell you?

What do you imagine has just happened before this picture was taken?

Freed from the need to make words rhyme, many gifted writers produce verse with extraordinarily sensitive and vivid imagery:

A mournful sky

Shivering

Casting waves of unhappiness through her veins

Thoughtful limbs

Reach upward to plant a kiss on a frowning thought

comforting

A seed

Soon to change the color of Mother Sky to a rich healthy sapphire blue

that will burn away her black cape of troubles

Melt them down to tiny drops

Letting them fall away to cool the Earth

Then thank her fellow trees

And invite them up her stairway for tea, as an honor for their kindness

— Kendall, grade 5

Exploring the Elements of Fiction

Divergent thinking. Exploring the elements of fiction can be exciting if students are asked to improvise and think divergently about the stories. All students can benefit from the critical thinking that this strategy demands, and the teacher can adapt it to more difficult content, depending on the ability and grade level of the students. Begin with fundamental questions: *If you could change this, what would you change it to? How? Why?* Then break down the different elements of a composition and discuss how specific changes would change the whole effect.

Using fractured fairy tales to explore fiction. Fractured fairy tales are designed to be humorous by changing a familiar story in an unexpected way, such as altering the plot, a character, or setting. One student might decide to make *Little Red Riding Hood* a tough, strong girl, completely unafraid of the wolf and able to save her grandmother. Another student may select a fictional

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superhero and create a humorous flaw that causes problems when he/she has to save the day. When the teacher presents a fractured fairy tale, asking a series of questions helps the children think through the changes and what they mean. Examples include:

What characters in this story differ from the original and how?

Which events occur in the new one that don't in the original?

How do the changes in characters and plot in the second one change the meaning and/or the way you feel about the characters?

How does this change the overall effect?

What do you think the writer is trying to say in this new version?

When students are asked to change the nature of even a few characters in a fairytale, they will discover that the smallest change can affect plot. If their changes remove the conflict and suspense from the story, the teacher can take them back to the original story. *What moment in the story held the most tension for them? What kept them riveted to the story?* Re-examining their own ideas, gifted students can then identify the areas where the conflict and suspense have gone and can brainstorm ways to create new conflicts. This process can apply to the simplest stories as well as to the most advanced novels and plays. For gifted students, the possibilities are limitless and the problems presented by the process endlessly fascinating. The key is to discuss the relationships across story elements and to examine what is gained or lost with each change.

A Study of Perspective: Biographical and Historical Fiction

Biographies and histories provide rich material for gifted students to re-imagine actual events from new, even unusual points of view. Gifted students rarely accept anything on face value and enjoy debating points in politics and history based on their own alternate readings of the events. Writing biographical and historical fiction enables them to capitalize on this talent and use it to explore different perspectives both critically and creatively.

Researching the facts. Begin by exposing the students to the life experiences of prominent men and women through books, magazines, and short films, and through pictures, drawings, or images of their work. Ask them what influences in these individuals' young lives affected their development, how they overcame the obstacles or challenges that stood in their way, and what their most significant contributions were. When they write this information down in paragraph form or as a series of notes and also jot down any questions they have about the person's life, many gifted students find themselves continually going back to do more research as the story develops in more detail. This is one of the great values of biographical (and historical) fiction: It inspires deeper research and a more critical analysis of issues that appear in their story.

Creating a point of view. Choose a person (or animal or object) in a prominent person's life and describe an event from this perspective. It could be the person's brother, sister, friend, dog, or even his/her favorite pen. As students begin to tell their stories, they discover how individual points of view create a different focus and perspective than the more "objective" biographies that synthesize information from multiple sources.

Historical fiction works in a similar way. For example, the class may study the Civil War period. After the students acquire a detailed understanding of the issues and conflicts between the north and south and events that finally drove the two sides to war, ask them to create a character from this period. The students create a personal history for their imaginary character and write a story or anecdote that *could have* occurred in the life of this person in this place in this time.

Gifted students who use biography and history as a source for creating fiction begin to see history—and non-fiction generally—in a different light. Within a news report or a historical event are many individual lives, each with a slightly different perspective. Perhaps in no other form do critical and creative thinking work so closely. Gifted writers who love history discover a limitless source of material—the stories of many civilizations around the world—that can become the world of their characters, the cause of conflicts, the most suspenseful moments of their own stories. These activities lead to a reflective understanding of how the stories of history are told and how bias can impact the representation of events

Conclusion

Language arts instruction for gifted must provide students with the techniques and sources that fully engage their analytical minds and imaginative talents. Gifted readers and writers can expand their experience of literature when they respond to it through their own original work—creative writing, designing, composing and dramatizing. Higher-level thinking skills of analysis, interpretation, and evaluation are inherent to the creative processes described in this digest. When used as a curriculum extension, the strategies are especially for gifted students, and may also be used to teach critical thinking skills to all children.

Resources

Internet resources cited in this document were current at the time of publication. Please note that Web addresses are subject to change.

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Web sites for fractured fairy tales:

http://www.eduplace.com/rdg/hmll/blue/talc/fairy.html
http://www.ed.uri.edu/unitweb/lgoudailler/project.htm
http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/ffl.html

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